

IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Data recovery offered for 'any-brand' disks

Last week in this column I discussed a rare promise made by Polaroid Corp. regarding its new floppy disks for personal computers. If the disks are ever damaged — by spilled coffee, sticky fingerprints, dust, smoke, ashes or whatever — and you lose data as a result, Polaroid will quickly recover the data and return it to you on a new diskette.

Best of all, there is *no charge* for the service. Polaroid will even send it back to you by Federal Express if that's the way you sent it to them.

This service is so unique, and so valuable, that I suggested that business users of personal computers should seek out and purchase the Polaroid brand diskettes, just to get the guarantee. It's best to start by switching over the diskettes you use for your day-to-day work, since these diskettes are more prone to accidents and damage, while relegating your old diskettes for backup purposes.

But what happens if your *non-Polaroid* brand diskettes are damaged? Since Polaroid won't work on them, what do you do?

I was happy to discover that at least one firm provides a similar service for users of "any-brand" diskettes. Data Protection Services Inc., of Tulsa, Okla., specializes in handling these types of problems. Other firms might also do the same thing, but this was the first one to come to my attention.

One thing that impressed me about DPS was that the firm also handles data recovery for hard disks, computer tapes and magnetic media other than floppy disks. This will particularly interest data processing managers, since minicomputers and mainframes have disk-packs that are more prone to catastrophic "head crashes" than personal computers.

be "played" on the original equipment without "hearing the scratch."

In the case of PC-DOS or MS-DOS operating systems (the kind used on IBM PCs and most other business-use personal computers today), the firm will also add or delete individual bits of data, if necessary, in order to reconstruct damaged portions. This might be required if the "data dictionary" is destroyed. That's the crucial part of a tape or disk that lists all the files contained on it. If destroyed, you might get a "File Not Found" message when the data is actually there. By reconstructing the dictionary (again, not a trivial task), your data will miraculously reappear.



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What's the best way to *avoid* using DPS's services? Geppelt did not hesitate in answering. "Do frequent backups and store copies of all your programs and data off-site. If everyone did, I'd be out of business. But people forget, their procedures are lax, and they get in trouble."

Another common error by inexperienced operators is they "keep messing around" with a disk that's damaged, trying to recover the lost data. Often these attempts will actually make it impossible to recover the data later on.

Here's why:

✓ When you get a "File Not Found" message on your screen, the computer thinks that the space where the file used to be is now available.

✓ If, in your attempts to recover the file, you inadvertently move around or copy other files — this may be done automatically by the operating system while you're performing another operation — the "available" space on the disk is then used for the new one.

✓ Once the space has been reused, the prior data is irretrievable.

According to Gary Geppelt, president of DPS, his firm averages two successful recoveries per week from companies in distress. It does not matter where the company or problem is located. Geppelt doesn't travel! Depending on the problem, he instructs the company to send either the original or a copy of the disk or tape to him. Sometimes the entire disk drive or tape drive is sent, but usually just the media is required.

In all cases, the firm's first task is to clean and remove the damage, much the same way a scratch may be removed from a phonograph record. It's not a trivial task, but according to Geppelt, it can be done with the proper equipment and techniques. If successful, the refurbished disk or tape can then

ably lost. Unless you're the CIA or FBI, you probably don't have equipment sensitive enough to read the residue of the prior electrical charge, nor the staff of Ph.Ds to interpret the results.

If you find yourself in a situation where the dreaded "File Not Found" message appears, the best course of action is *very little action*. Just sit still and telephone an expert. If you're lucky, your cost to retrieve your data will be under a hundred dollars — and just a few more white hairs.

In next week's column, I provide some data-preservation tips to help you save the money.

What about the white hairs? If you have an answer to that problem, let me know!

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